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Raffaele Poli

## Migrations and trade of African football players: historic, geographical and cultural aspects

### *Abstract*

Professional football clubs worldwide are recruiting an increasing number of African players. While the underlying vested interests for profit and business are important, it is on a cultural level that this phenomenon has its greatest impact. The African football player as a popular icon, ambassador and mediator, is invested with a triple role, which is often difficult for him to assume. Indeed, of the multitude of young candidates who exile themselves for football, only a handful of them manage to pursue a successful career. However, due to the prevailing context of media over-exposure of football, millions of young Africans dream of leaving their country by playing this sport. In many sub-Saharan African countries football is being increasingly considered as a separate career path altogether.

### *Keywords*

*Africa, football, migration, international trade, labour*

This article explores the trade in, and the international migration of African football players. The objective is to tackle the question from a multi-disciplinary perspective using the fruits of personal research carried out in this field over the past six years. It is this purpose that underlies the recourse to numerous articles already written or co-written. The paper describes various aspects which influence and determine the international football migration networks. Although this article does not claim to have any great theoretical ambitions, it has been, nevertheless, influenced by work carried out by British researchers who have applied a world-system theory to sport and the migration of sporting personnel (Bale/Maguire 1994, Maguire 1999, Bale 2001).

My purpose here is not to denounce the macro-economic logic that leads to the 'muscle drain' of sportsmen from poor countries to the clubs of rich ones occurring in a context of neo-colonial imperialism (Darby 2002). Rather, it is concerned with describing processes of football migration using case studies of particular African players according to three complementary research approaches: historical, geographical and cultural. By combining these

three approaches the goal is to show that the increasing number of African football players in Europe is explained as much by 'pull' factors (continuing colonial links, the search for 'new markets', the setting up of transfer networks, etc.), as 'push' factors (lack of structure in African football, football's new status, increased attractiveness due to satellite television, etc.).

Since 2000, I have made four research visits of varying length to the Ivory Coast which add up to a total of eight months of fieldwork. During my stays there I have carried out interviews with forty people, mainly trainers, involved in football. In 2005, I also distributed a questionnaire to 23 members of the Ivory Coast national under 17 squad in order to find out more about the underlying motivations linked to the practice of football in terms of migration and career possibilities. In addition, I interviewed about thirty different actors involved in professional football in Europe, of which sixteen were Africans playing for Swiss clubs (nine from Cameroon and the remaining seven from Senegal).<sup>1</sup> I have also collaborated in the conception and implementing of a database that permits the quantification of the international flux of professional football players in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this article introduces, from a historical perspective, the problems of migration and the above-mentioned international trade in African football players. The second part deals with the question from a geographical angle, and the third proposes an analysis of the phenomenon in terms of its cultural implications. The more political and economic aspects are treated in a transversal manner without, however, being the central focus of this analysis. The political features are analysed in more detail in an article published in *Politique Africaine* (Dietschy/Poli 2006), while the economic questions are specifically explored in the article published in *Soccer and Society* (Poli 2006).

In the first three parts of this article the different topics of international African football migration and trade are examined and developed in a more or less independent fashion, whereas the conclusion will highlight the manner in which the diverse facets of historical, geographical and cultural perspectives are interrelated and influence each other.

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1 Between 30 and 40 African players are playing for professional Swiss clubs. Most of them are from Senegal and Cameroon.

2 A 'Professional Football Players Observatory' has recently been created. Principle findings can be consulted at <http://www.eurofootplayers.org>. This observatory has been set up by the International Centre for Sports Studies (CIES) of the University of Neuchâtel and the Centre d'étude et de recherche sur le sport et l'observation territoriale (CERSOT) of the University of Franche-Comté.

## Trade and migration of African football players: historical aspects

The history of the presence of African football players in Europe is not as recent as one might think. Already in the 1930s French clubs recruited players from the Maghreb. This concerned, for the most part, Moroccan players recruited via a network organised between France and Casablanca, in particular by the US Marocaine club. Thus, in 1938, the 'Black Pearl'<sup>3</sup>, Larbi Ben Barek, was transferred to Olympic Marseille (Mahjoub 1998). Five months after his arrival in France, Ben Barek was made part of the French national team. From the 1930s until the 1950s, other footballers from the US Marocaine were recruited by French clubs (Zatelli, Janin, Fontaine, Chicha, the Mahjoub brothers, etc.). During the same period, professional French teams also transferred numerous Algerian players (Boubekeur, Zitouni, Arribi, Ben Tifour, Meftah, Belaïd, Haddad, etc.). The best of them became part of the national team, too. This was notably the case of Rachid Mekhloufi, tactician for AS Saint-Etienne and player for the French national squad until the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1958, two months before the start of the World Cup in which he was supposed to play for the national team. He finally decided to leave France and go to Tunis to put together the team of the National Liberation Front (Lanfranchi/Wahl 1996). He was accompanied by 31 other football players from the Maghreb who were playing for French professional clubs (Monaco, Saint-Étienne, Bordeaux, Toulouse, etc.) (Mahjoub 1998).

Being aware of the potential of players present in French West African colonies, where football had been developing rapidly from the end of the World War II onwards, French clubs began to prospect in that part of the world. A player of Senegalese origin, Raoul Diagne, had already played for the Racing Club de France and for the French national team in the 1930s. His arrival in France, however, was not directly linked to football. This player was no one else than the son of Blaise Diagne, deputy of the National Assembly. Born in Guyana, Raoul Diagne came to France to pursue his studies. It was not until the 1950s that transfer networks were put in place between West Africa and France. Thus, the number of players from West Africa increased from 'a handful around 1955, [to] some 43 by 1960' (Lanfranchi/Taylor 2001: 174). In the same decade the Portuguese clubs also began to recruit players from their colonies in Africa: 'By the early 1960s the importation of Africans had reached almost the same level as in France, with thirty employed by first-division clubs' (Lanfranchi/Taylor 2001: 179). Similarly to those in France,

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3 The use of precious stones (pearls, diamonds, gold nuggets etc.) as names for African players is not something that has happened by chance. This type of reference, which continues to be used until today, reminds us within the world of football of how Africa was considered to exist as part of world economy, where Africa served primarily for the export of raw materials.

they were sometimes employed in the national team. This happened to such players as Eusebio and Mario Esteves Coluña. These players had been spotted and recruited in Mozambique following tours by Portuguese clubs in their former African colonies (Coehlo 2001).

Contrary to France and Portugal, where football players from African colonies were already present before independence, the first Congolese players were only recruited by Belgian clubs from 1960 onwards (Bastin 1998). Around thirty players, which included the best known such as Kialunda, Bonga Bonga, Kimoni, Kasongo and Assaka, were thus transferred to Belgium. However, the political climate had radically changed. With independence there was no question of the new leaders of African states letting these players reinforce the ranks of European national squads. After the first phase of international migration of African footballers from 1930 until 1960, which was characterized by a policy of assimilation, a second period began when the African states set up national squads and adopted protectionist policies to hold on to the best players. Football thus became for African states a privileged means to affirm their newly acquired sovereignty in the eyes of the rest of the world (Augustin 1999). Within the context of decolonisation and under the influence of the Soviet Union, the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF) prohibited the selection of professional expatriates for matches between national teams within the framework of the Africa Cup of Nations (Coupe d'Afrique des Nations, CAN). The first tournament of the Cup took place in 1957 and the championship went on to enjoy increasing success in the 1960s.

As a result of the ban on the selection of footballers playing in Europe it became necessary for states and African football federations to keep the best players at home. This is the reason why, for example, the Congolese presidency reacted firmly against the above-mentioned exodus towards Belgium by legislating in favour of keeping players on national soil. From 1966 onwards, the transfer of players to places outside of Congolese territory was subject to a 'preliminary authorisation from relevant authorities, in this case the High Commission for Youth and Sports of the Central Government'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the best Congolese players were kept at home right up until the 1980s. Everywhere in Africa states reinforced obstacles in order to prevent the departure of the best players. This was the case of the Malian Salif Keita, who, in 1967, was forbidden to leave his country, and had to flee via Liberia to France, where he won many trophies with AS Saint-Etienne.

The third phase of the trade and international migration of African football players began at the beginning of the 1980s. It was characterised by the

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4 CAN dossier République Démocratique du Congo, letter from V. N'Joli to the Belgian Fédération, 2 March 1966, FIFA Archives.

increase in the number of African footballers abroad. At first, the number of African players grew in Europe and especially in the nations that were former colonial powers. Progressively, however, as we will illustrate more amply in the following part of this article, the trade and migration of African players spread to other European countries and the rest of the world. The increase in the number of African players who go abroad has been the result of a double process. On the one hand, it is due to the weakening in Africa of political restraints regarding the leaving of players. This is linked to the decision of the Confédération Africaine de Football to allow expatriate professional players into national squads as well as the new regulations put in place by the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) in 1981 that oblige clubs to liberate players when they are selected to play for their national teams. Within the new regulatory context, the fact of having players abroad suddenly became more of an advantage than a hindrance for the African federations. Very rapidly we can notice a change from an 'endogenous' strategy to an 'exogenous' one (Dietschy/Poli 2006).

The progressive weakening of the quota regime in Europe explains the second process.<sup>5</sup> It has given European clubs greater scope for recruitment possibilities abroad, which immediately resulted in the seeking for greater comparative advantages through the outsourcing of training, especially in Latin America and Africa, where the ratio between the quality and the cost of the players is particularly favourable. The outsourcing of player training goes hand in hand with the setting up of centres in the countries of the above-mentioned continents, the conclusion of partnership agreements with local clubs aiming at transferring young players to Europe for a lesser cost, and by the creation of global observation networks (Poli 2005). The following extract taken from Feyenoord Rotterdam's website is particularly apt:

The days that Feyenoord could afford to just scout in Ommoord and Croswijk are over. The club goes all over the world looking for young talents. Just like all the other international top clubs, Feyenoord now has a network of tipsters that stretches to all continents: from Ghana to Brazil and from Sweden to Japan.<sup>6</sup>

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5 From the end of the 1920s until the 1995/96 season, European clubs could not employ more than a number varying from 1 to 3 players who did not have a national passport. On the 15th of December 1995, with the decreeing of the 'Bosman Law', the European Union court of justice rendered null the quotas limiting the number of EU players. Afterwards, other decrees followed (Kolpak, Malaja, Simutenkov, etc.) which enlarged the possibilities of free movement, opening it to footballers of other nationalities, too. Certain countries, such as Belgium, have even abandoned all quotas. In France, an African player is no longer concerned with quotas since he has played in at least one match in the national team of his country of origin, also at a junior level.

6 <http://www.feyenoord.nl> (25 July 2004).

Feyenoord signed partnership agreements with a view to transfer and to loan players with the following clubs, America Belo Horizonte (Brasil), Paramata Power (Australia), Grampus Eight (Japan), B'93 Copenhagen (Denmark), Helsingborgs IF (Sweden), Excelsior Rotterdam (Holland), Westerlo (Belgium) and Supersport United (South Africa). The Dutch club also owns a football school in Ghana called Fetteh Football Academy (Poli 2004a).

### Migration of African football players: geographical aspects

From the 1995/1996 to the 2004/2005 season, the number of players recruited abroad by top-level clubs of eleven European countries (England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, Italy, Portugal) has more than doubled, increasing from 882 to 1803.<sup>7</sup> If in the 1995/1996 season a team included an average of 4.8 foreign players, in 2004/2005, there were 9.8 foreign players per club. From a global perspective, three zones appear to be the main departure areas of players towards European clubs: Europe itself, Latin America and West Africa (see map 1-2). In absolute terms, from 1995 to 2004, the number of Latin American players has increased from 155 to 431, while the number of African players has gone from 160 to 316. In relative terms, if the percentage of Latin American football players among the foreigners has increased from 17 to 24%, the percentage of African ones has remained stable at around 17%. Nevertheless, if we consider that the free movement primarily concerned players having a European Union passport, this stability, in conjunction with the increase of the African players' recruitment in absolute terms, can be considered as an index of the growing interest of the best European clubs in Africa (see graph. 1).

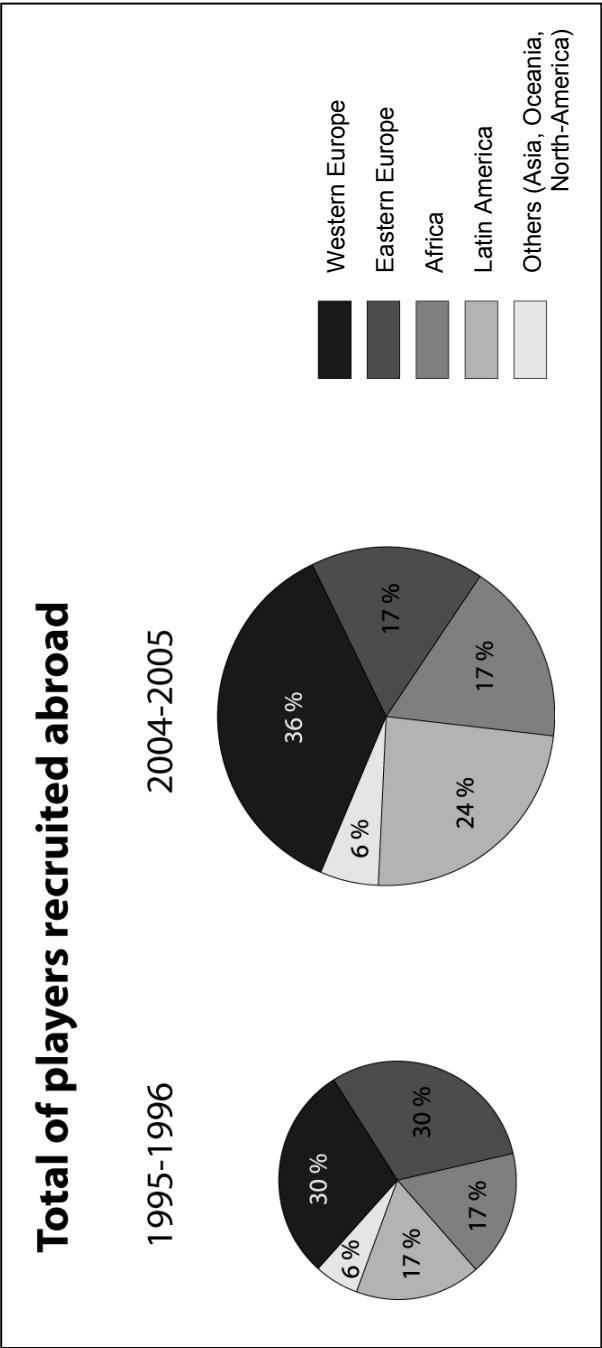
If we change our perspective and look at the African players' presence during the 2002/2003 season in 78 professional and semi-professional leagues of the 52 UEFA (Union of European Football Associations/Union Européenne de Football Association) countries,<sup>8</sup> we can note that their total figure was 1,156. They represented 19.6% of the total amount of foreign players.

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<sup>7</sup> In the absence of official statistics, the data presented in this article comes from three principle sources: Internet sites (particularly the [www.soccerassociation.com](http://www.soccerassociation.com)), football year-books (mainly the *A-Z del Futbol Europe*) and specialist magazines (*France Football*, *Kicker*, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Don Balon*, etc.). I have used the principle of data crosschecking in order to validate my approach.

<sup>8</sup> This statistical study took into account a total of 78 leagues.

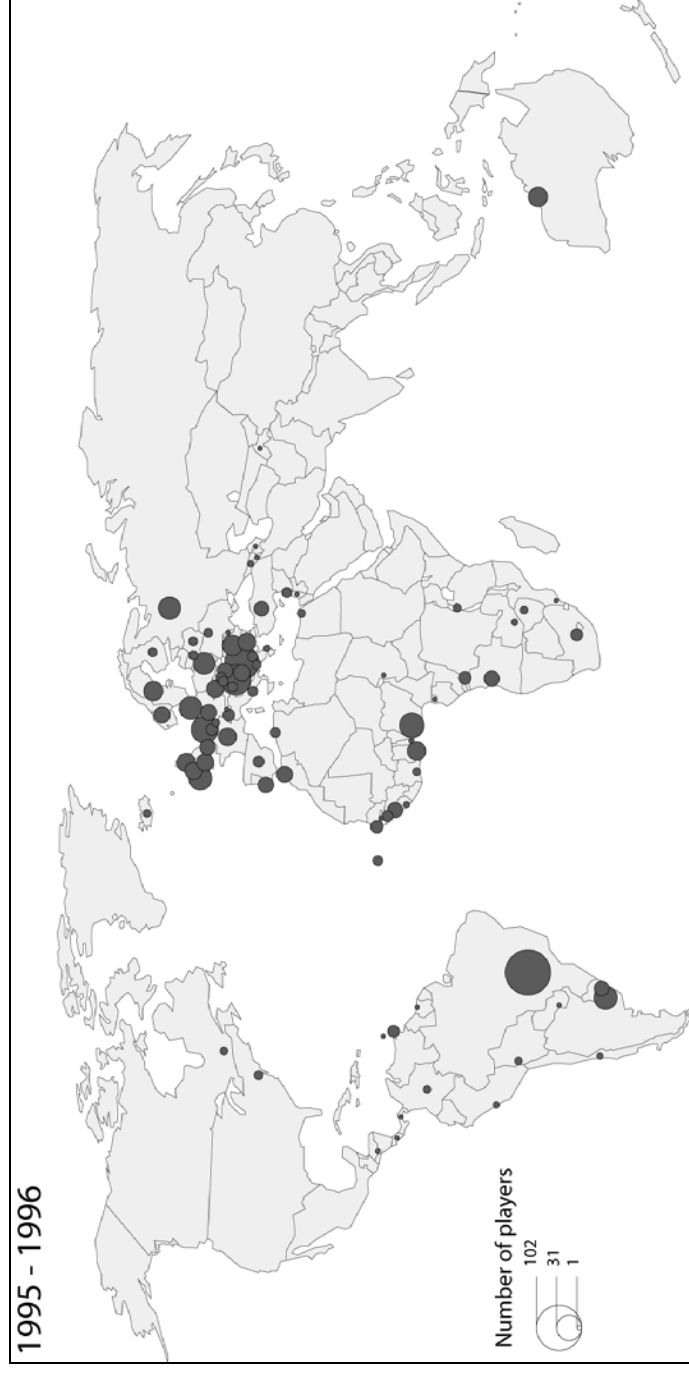
Graph 1: Percentage of foreign players in eleven European leagues according to their region of origin

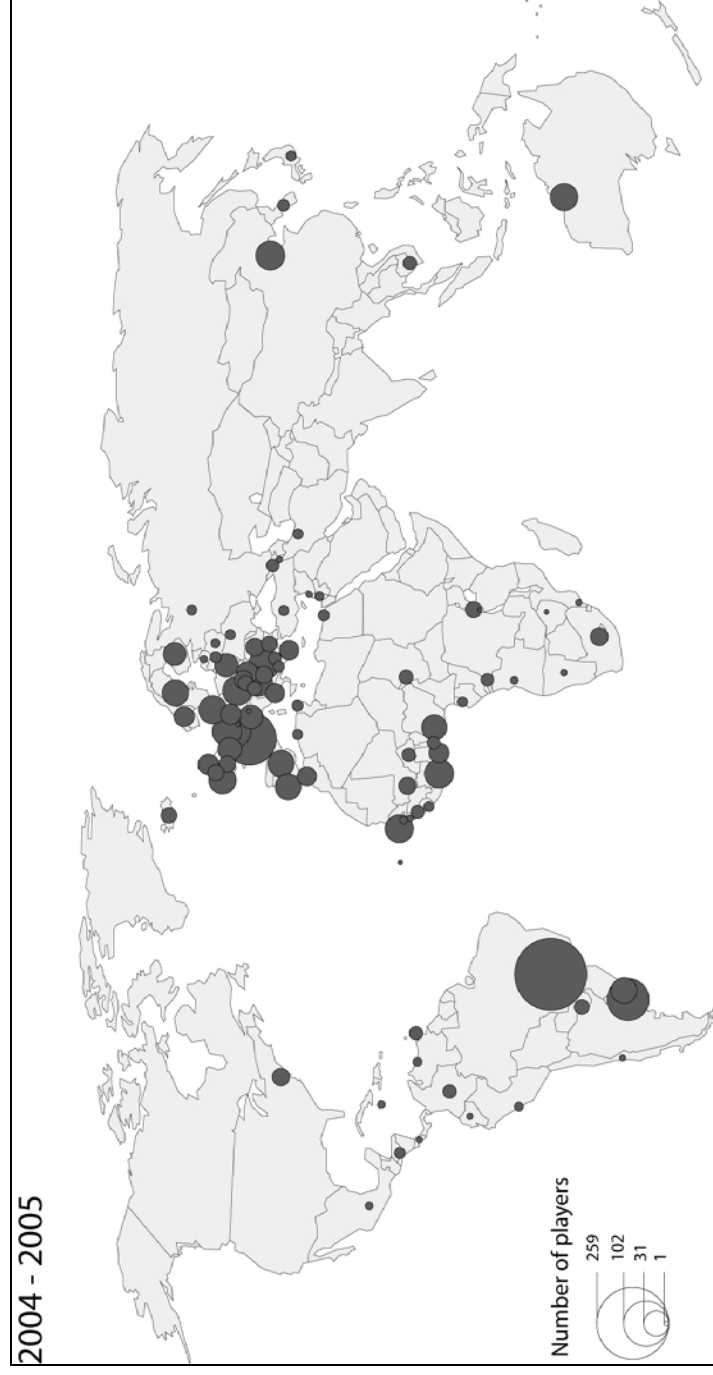


Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).



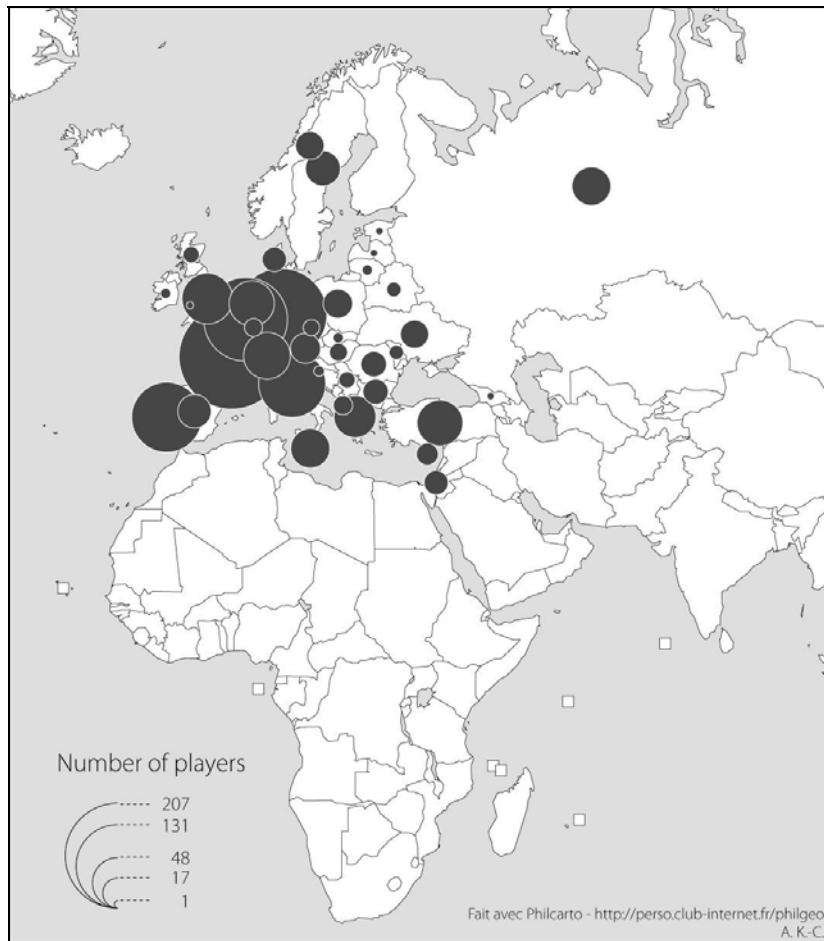
Map 1-2: Country of origin of foreign players playing in eleven European leagues





Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).

Map 3: European countries receiving African football players (2002/2003)



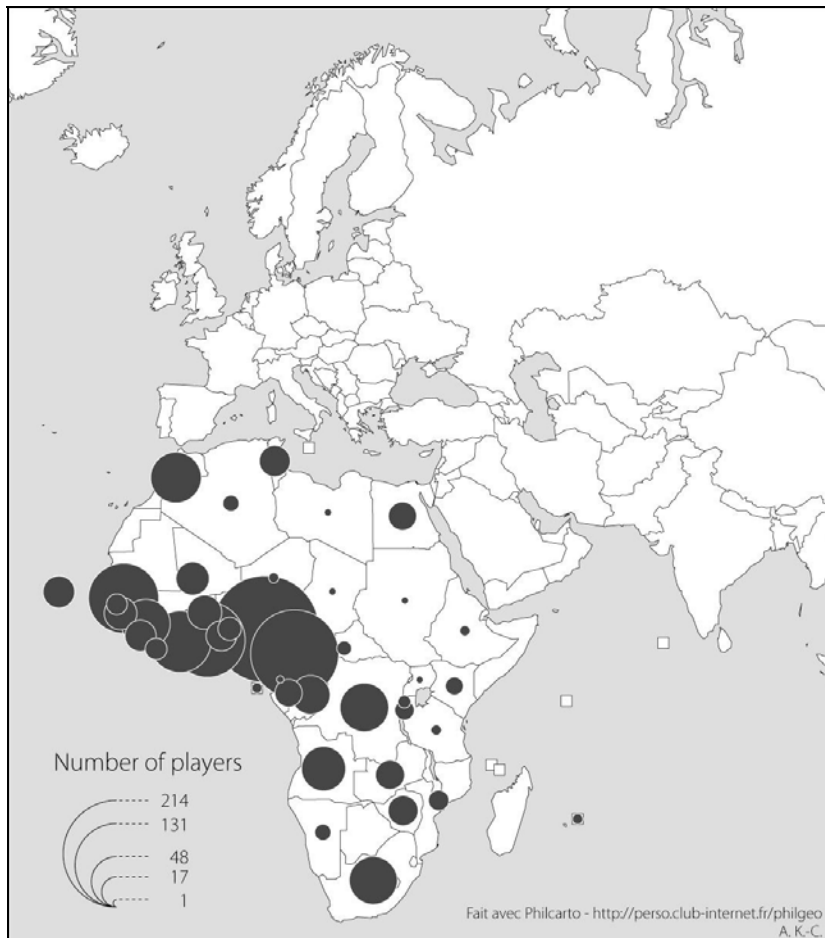
Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).

The main receiver countries are always the old colonial states, particularly France, Portugal and Belgium. Italian and German clubs import many African players, too, while English clubs recruit a relatively small number of players from this continent. Except in the British case,<sup>9</sup> we can observe the persistence

<sup>9</sup> In England, only players who have played at least three quarters of the matches of their national teams during the two years preceding their eventual transfer to an English club can obtain a work permit. As the majority of African squads are made up of expatriate players, it is almost impossible for an African football player to immigrate directly to England. As a

of networks that are part of a colonial legacy, even if African players are now also very often employed in countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Greece, Switzerland and Malta, among others (see map 3).

Map 4: African countries supplying players destined for Europe (2002/2003)



Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).

result, numerous English clubs (Arsenal, Manchester United, Chelsea, Charlton) have set agreements with Belgian ones (Beveren, Royal Antwerp, Westerlo, Germinal Beerschoot) so as to place young African players they have scouted in their country of origin, waiting until they reach maturity before eventually integrating them into their squad.

Among the supplier countries, West Africa has emerged as being the area most concerned with these movements (see map 4). This region has overtaken the Maghreb as the main provider of players to European clubs. Numerous players from Sub-Saharan Africa are also signed by Maghrebi clubs (in particular Morocco, Tunisia and Libya), in the hope of being subsequently transferred to Europe. By comparison to West Africa, East Africa remains unaffected by the flux of African football players towards Europe. However, the situation is radically different regarding athletics (Bale/Sang 1996).

The presence of African players abroad is not at all limited to Europe. Indeed, African players find themselves in the four corners of the earth, especially in the countries of the Persian Gulf (Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, etc.) and in South-East Asia (China, Vietnam, Malaysia, etc.). I have even recorded cases of commuting between Bangladesh, where the season only lasts from July until September, and Hong Kong. This is notably the case of the Nigerian Colly Barnes. This forward, recruited by Happy Valley Hong Kong in 1996, has since 2001 also participated in the Bangladesh season for the Abahani Football Club of Dakha: 'I was preparing to go home at the end of a season when a friend told me that Abahani wanted a striker. So I decided to come here and make extra money, rather than spend money at home'.<sup>10</sup> Other players have followed the inverse trajectory to that of Barnes. The Ghanaian Charles Ghansah, for example, who arrived in Bangladesh in 1999 via the intermediary of the 'Bangaldeshi scout visiting Ghana in search of talent'<sup>11</sup>, has also put his talents at the disposal of a Hong Kong club. Even if they are much less affected by the phenomenon of migration than their male counterparts, women football players are henceforth recruited by American universities. The Ghanaians Alberta Sackey, Elizabeth Baidu, Adjoa Bayor, Basilea Amoah-Tetteh and Kulu Yahaya, and the Nigerian Patience Avre, for example, frequent the Robert Morris College, near Chicago.

The strong presence of African players abroad is reflected in national squads, where the number of players playing in local clubs is very small. Thus, during the final phase of the 2006 World Cup, only 19.1% of players selected by African teams were playing for clubs in their respective countries. This percentage was higher for the selections belonging to the four other confederations that had more than one team at the World Cup. In decreasing order, it was situated at 81.5% for countries of the Asian confederation, at 63.7% for countries of the North and Central American confederation, at 51.2% for the countries of the European confederation and at 33.7% for the countries of the South American confederation.

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<sup>10</sup> *West Africa* 4346, 07-13 Oct. 2002.

<sup>11</sup> *West Africa* 4346, 07-13 Oct. 2002.

The greater part of African players selected for the final phase of the 2006 World Cup played in Europe (see map 5). Among the 25 countries represented, 18 were part of the European confederation. French clubs employed 31 of the 115 players present in the World Cup (26.9%).

With the passing of time, the football player has progressively become an 'export' product for certain African countries, so much so that it no longer seems abusive to compare him, from an economic point of view, to a commodity from which value added chains are developed (Gereffi/Korzeniewicz 1994, Dicken 2003). Timothée Atouba, for example, according to his account, was transferred in 2000 from Union Douala to Neuchâtel Xamax for 28,000 Euro, an amount which was multiplied by a factor of ten one year later when he went from Neuchâtel to Basel and again multiplied by ten when he was transferred from Basel to the London club of Tottenham. The highest sum paid to date for a transfer of an African player is about 38 million Euro. It was paid out in 2005 by Chelsea to Olympique Lyonnais for the 'purchase' of the Ghanaian midfielder Michael Essien. For comparison, this same player, when he arrived in Europe in 2000, was transferred from Liberty Accra to SC Bastia for free.<sup>12</sup> In 2003, Bastia had sold the player to Olympique Lyonnais for 8 million Euro.

### International migration of African football players: cultural aspects

The vested interests in the international migration of African football players are not only linked with economic aspects but also with ones of a cultural nature. This cultural impact involves a larger (and growing) number of persons compared to the social actors directly involved in the migratory flux of players. In most countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, in a context where there is less and less of a correlation between successful schooling and a facilitated entry into the professional world, the presence in Europe of players having grown up locally stimulates surrounding societies to consider football as a profession in its own right. Henceforth, in the majority of families, a young person's desire to pursue a career in football is no longer perceived negatively. As the practice of the profession of football player for a Sub-Saharan African often involves a departure abroad, football is considered more and more as a means to achieve the migratory dream, which is very widespread among the African population.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Telephonic interview with Jo Bonavita, sporting director of SC Bastia, 22 Nov. 2006.

13 According to a survey carried out among 7,500 persons in ten African countries in 2005 by the BBC, 'if people could choose any country to live in, most would not choose their own country. ... Only in 4 countries - Kenya, Cameroon, Tanzania and Mozambique - do over 40% of people select their own country as first preference. Malawians and Ivorians would be the least likely to choose their own country to live in, given the choice. In fact, 84% of those

Map 5: Countries in which African players selected for the 2006 World Cup played



Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).

The new status associated with football in the principle African countries supplying players is thus defined by two essential elements: the idea that football is an activity that allows access to an occupation which is considered both financially and socially rewarding; and the belief that playing football facilitates a departure to countries where the local population dreams of go-

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living in the Ivory Coast would opt to live outside their country'. Online: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18\\_10\\_04\\_pulse.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_10_04_pulse.pdf) (29 Aug. 2006).

ing. Apart from the 'pure' passion for the game, these two elements constitute essential factors if we are to understand the underlying reasons for the proliferation of training centres for young football players in the neighbourhoods of major African capitals (Poli 2002, 2003).

The African media play a central role in the popularization of football as a professional activity in its own right. By only showing a few career paths of successful players, they contribute to a partial image of reality and thus function as a deforming prism. In the Ivorian press, for example, the exploits of the football players of that country playing for the biggest European clubs (Didier Drogba, Kolo Touré, Emmanuel Eboué, etc.) take up much space. This is often much greater than the space devoted to coverage of matches in the local championships. The media ignore almost systematically, that, in comparison to the African players who attain glory and prosperity through football, the vast majority of footballers from the continent who attempt their chances in Europe fail and find themselves often in precarious situations (Poli 2004a). By only concentrating on the success stories, the media feed the illusion of an easy way, which is a notion shared by many young Africans. Thus, among the 23 players of the Ivorian under 17's national team who filled out the questionnaire that I had given them, 18 of them stated that, once in Europe, it would be easy to find a place in a professional club. According to their trainer, however, only three or four of them had the necessary talent to break through in Europe.

Due to the media coverage given to them, the African footballers playing in the big European clubs become veritable popular icons. Because they often originate from modest backgrounds, they serve as illustrations that success is possible, an idea which is greatly amplified by publicity slogans. Consequently, in Abidjan, the giant publicity hoardings with the portraits of Kolo Touré, Didier Drogba and Aruna Dindané, with the associated logo of the telecommunications company Orange, mark out the principle motorway arteries. On one of these hoardings, visible throughout the Abidjan in May 2006, one could read: 'Your Efforts will be Rewarded'. Puma, the official kit supplier to African teams participating in the 2006 World Cup exploited the same discourse register by showing worldwide an advertisement depicting a young African player gaining stardom through football. This advert was harshly criticised by Culture Foot Solidaire, an association based in Paris that is active in helping numerous young African players who have not had such successful career paths. According to them, this kind of publicity contributes to 'perpetuating the naivety of millions of young African adolescents' by promoting



'football through rose tinted glasses'.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this 'naivety' is sometimes more the fruit of despair than a real one.

Expatriate African football players are more than mere advertising mascots for certain brands. In a context of national pride, which is often subverted due to existing political and economic problems, the population of their respective countries invests these players in Europe with the role of ambassadors. The presence in Europe of local football players is something that is held in high esteem. As a result, we can remark on the proliferation of Internet sites, many of which are devoted to expatriate African players.<sup>15</sup> Following the matches of clubs in which these footballers play live via satellite has become a must-do activity. The 'video-clubs' are omni-present in the less well off neighbourhoods of Abidjan, where, for the sum of 100 CFA (in Euro, this would be 16 Cent), young people watch on the Canal+ Horizons channel the matches of the major European championships (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian). More than twenty years ago, the sociologist Abdou Touré (1982) already presented the 'Ivorian-model' as an insatiable consumer of Western models and objects.

The local player abroad is not only a popular icon and an ambassador but also an intermediary for African fans in their support for European teams. Consequently, during the final of the 2006 Champions League, Abidjan came to a standstill for two solid hours so as fans could watch Arsenal, who has Ivorian players in its squad. The *woro woro* taxi drivers had great difficulty in earning enough money that day. This was impossible to do during the first two matches of the Ivorian national team in the 2006 World Cup. On account of their migration and the media coverage that surrounds their career, Ivorian football players contribute to the creation of new virtual proximities (Vertovec 1999). Chris Barker affirmed in regard to this phenomenon, quoting the media studies specialist Joshua Meyrowitz, that

electronic media break the traditional bonds between geographic place and social identity since mass media provide us with increasing sources of identification which are situated beyond the immediacy of specific places (1997: 186).

A strong correlation between the identification with a player and the identification with a team also became apparent in the questionnaire that was handed out to Ivorian players: all of the preferred teams mentioned by the

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14 See the press release at this address: [www.footsolidaire.org/actualites/appelemonde.htm](http://www.footsolidaire.org/actualites/appelemonde.htm) (29 Aug. 2006).

15 See, for example, [www.nigerianplayers.com](http://www.nigerianplayers.com), [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/soccer](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/soccer), [www.camfoot.com](http://www.camfoot.com), [www.africafoot.com](http://www.africafoot.com).

under 17 Ivory Coast national team footballers had at one time or another in their squad players with whom the youths claimed they most identified with.

As Fatou Diome (2003) has clearly shown, it is undeniable that football and its promulgation through the mass media have contributed to the increase in African youth of the desire to succeed through emigration. The fieldwork carried out in a country such as the Ivory Coast can only confirm this. However, other realities exist in Africa. In Senegal, for example, according to the account given by football player Badara Niakhasso, many young players prefer to participate in *navétanes* tournaments (Mbaye 1998), which are followed up closely, and to gain a solid local reputation, rather than to take part in official championships with the immediate hope of pursuing a career abroad. Even though I am convinced that the kinds of process described in this chapter involve the majority of Sub-Saharan countries, it is also clear that other types of dynamics are at work in particular socio-historic contexts such as in the case briefly evoked in the preceding lines.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this article dealing with the historical aspects of football migration we have seen how the migration of football players is closely linked to colonial history. To the present day, the old colonial ties continue to structure the flow. Even though we can observe an increase in the number of countries affected by these movements, if we take as our reference the previously mentioned European countries, African football players, like their Latin American counterparts, continue to be over-represented in their former colonizing countries.

In analyzing the following table and looking at the intersection of the zone of origin of foreign footballers and the country in which they played during the 2005/2006 season, it becomes apparent that African players are concentrated in France, and, to a lesser extent, in Belgium. The vast majority of African players in France come from the former colonies. In the Belgian case, the concentration of Africans is not only due to the former colonial presence, the Congolese being over-represented, though not in the majority, but also because of economic criteria. Belgian clubs, less powerful financially than their counterparts from bordering countries, recruit many players in Africa for two main reasons. First, they take advantage of 'cheap' labour, which allows them to reduce costs. Second, the recruitment of young African players is part of a speculative strategy which aims at making profit by increasing the value of players and then selling them on to more financially powerful European clubs (Poli/Ravenel 2005). With their career in mind, according to the terms employed by the young African players interviewed,

the Belgian championship, in the manner of the Swiss one, is supposed to function as 'showcase' and 'launching pad' (Poli 2006).

Table: Players' over-representation according to their region of origin (2004/2005)

	Anglophone Africa	Francophone Africa	Latin America	Eastern Europe	Western Europe
Germany	4.95	-16.80	-10.56	<b>31.52</b>	-9.11
England	-2.31	-15.15	-59.40	-23.94	<b>100.79</b>
Austria	1.50	-9.01	-17.11	<b>41.64</b>	-17.02
Belgium	4.99	<b>29.98</b>	-25.22	9.29	-19.03
Scotland	-4.50	-8.01	-19.11	-2.36	<b>33.98</b>
Spain	-5.88	-9.35	<b>41.70</b>	-13.98	-12.49
France	2.59	<b>59.56</b>	-5.18	-20.55	-36.42
Italy	0.48	-14.06	30.40	-2.32	-14.49
Netherlands	4.61	-5.03	-16.76	2.81	14.36
Portugal	-5.22	-14.91	<b>74.84</b>	-17.84	-36.88
Switzerland	-1.21	2.78	6.41	-4.28	-3.71

Source: author's databases (see footnote 7).

The transfer networks, even if they are becoming transnationalized, therefore, still continue to give priority to the linking of areas where relations are historically the strongest. Cultural, linguistic and geographical proximities continue to have a major importance. The international recruitment of football players carried out by European clubs follows spatial logics that tend to last over time. The international trade of football players thus shows that globalization manifests its limits if it is understood as the end of borders, as some researchers, economists in particular (Ohmae 1990, O'Brien 1992, Miyoshi 1993), have stated.

When one looks at the hopes that young Africans place in football and compares them to the actual conditions on the ground that these players have to cope with once they have migrated to Europe (Poli 2004a, 2004b) one cannot help noticing the enormous disparity. If we consider the conditions of employment offered to young African players in Europe, this discrepancy is due to the structure of the European football labour market, which is characterised by very marked segmentation (Bourg 1989), and the status that is attributed to them in this particular market (Poli 2006). These young people migrate at a very young age for trials without having previously signed a contract and are very often caught up in transfer networks that they have little

control over. Moreover, they are confronted with the problem of obtaining a work permit. As a result young African football players are easy prey for unscrupulous intermediaries (Tshimanga Bakadiababu 2001), or club directors who seek a cheap source of labour through wage dumping (Poli 2004b).

When one is aware of the restricted nature of the football labour market and the number of failed African players in Europe, cultural factors of the departure countries must be taken into account in order to fully understand the underlying vested interests in the international trade of African football players. These factors are attributable to the status of football on that continent, where it is considered a profession in its own right,<sup>16</sup> and to the status accorded to expatriate African players, who are invested with roles of popular icons and ambassadors. Because of the presence of African players in Europe, the playing of football has become a privileged means to aspire to a positive integration in the world, in Europe in particular, in a prevailing context of exclusion of the African continent and its inhabitants. Popular and media overexposure surrounding football can be interpreted in the light of the desire for inclusion and recognition. Every four years, the World Cup is an event that reminds us of an Africa other than the one associated with war, sickness and famine.

The other side of the coin of popular and media overexposure of football in Africa can be summed up by the expression 'the illusion of facility'. This illusion has the effect of convincing young African players that they have an illustrious future in European football. Their families henceforth often share this dream; one of the reasons why, once in Europe, young Africans do not want to return home even if they no longer have a contract. Such is the case with Samuel Ojong, a Cameroonian player who played for professional clubs in France and Switzerland and who is now without a contract; he states:

When you come back from Europe, people ask you what you have been up to. You can't stay here for two years and come back empty-handed. Even if you don't have a contract anymore, it's better to stay.<sup>17</sup>

This is precisely the level at which the drama unfolds for the hundreds of African migrant-footballers who, convinced that they will easily find an employer in Europe, jump at the first opportunity that comes to them. But their migratory dream nourished through football can sometimes be transformed

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<sup>16</sup> This process exists also elsewhere in the world where football is a popular sport. Nevertheless, its impact seems to be much greater in Sub Saharan Africa. Contrary to wealthier states, indeed, in very poor countries young people tend to consider football as the sole possibility to reach a good socio-economic position.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Interview, Neuchâtel, 3 Sept. 2003.

into a real nightmare. Often, the African football players' fate in Europe is not so different from the fate of more 'normal' African migrants.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Eine wachsende Zahl afrikanischer Fußballspieler wird weltweit von Proficlubs rekrutiert. Zwar sind die zugrundeliegenden Profit- und Geschäftsinteressen von Bedeutung, stärkere Auswirkungen hat dieses Phänomen jedoch auf kultureller Ebene. Als populäre Idole, Botschafter und Mittler sind afrikanische Fußballspieler unterschiedlichen Rollenerwartungen ausgesetzt, die sie oft nur schwer erfüllen können. Nur einer ganz kleinen Minderheit der zahlreichen jungen Bewerber, die zum Fußballspielen ins Ausland gehen, gelingt eine erfolgreiche Karriere. Unter dem herrschenden Einfluss der medialen Überrepräsentanz des Fußballs träumen dennoch Millionen junger Afrikaner davon, über das Fußballspielen ihr Land verlassen zu können. In vielen Ländern des subsaharischen Afrika wird Fußball zunehmend als ein Karrierepfad angesehen.

### **Schlüsselwörter**

*Afrika, Fußball, Migration, internationaler Handel, Arbeit*

### Résumé

Un nombre de plus en plus important de footballeurs africains est recruté par les clubs professionnels du monde entier. Si les enjeux économiques sous-jacents à ce commerce sont centraux, c'est au niveau culturel que l'impact de ce phénomène est le plus massif. Aussi bien icône populaire, ambassadeur que médiateur, le footballeur africain expatrié est investi d'un triple rôle qu'il lui est souvent difficile d'assumer. En effet, parmi la multitude de jeunes candidats à l'émigration par le football, seule une infime minorité réussit à faire carrière. Et pourtant, dans un contexte de surinvestissement médiatique du football, des millions de jeunes africains continuent de rêver de s'exiler en pratiquant ce sport, qui tend désormais à être considéré dans beaucoup de pays d'Afrique subsaharienne comme un débouché professionnel à part entière.

### Mots clés

*Afrique, football, migration, commerce international, travail*

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